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ABSTRACT

Three areas of research (second language acquisition (SLA), foreign languages (FL), and foreign language learning (FLL) are examined briefly and distinguished, and their relationship is discussed. The definition of FLL is then considered in greater detail. It is proposed that as an area of inquiry, FLL is characterized by specific features of its setting, object of research, method of investigation, and concepts of language and language learning. FLL in classrooms is affected by many variables that affect the propensity of learners to acquire a foreign language and the rate of acquisition. The question posed by FLL research is "How can we better understand the conditions of classroom FL learning and teaching so that we can change and improve these conditions?" suggesting an integrative orientation toward the learner. FLL, it is argued, must take an action-oriented rather than descriptive or quantitative approach. Finally, FLL research's concept of language must consider language in its total expressive and communicative thrust and deal with the global exploration of the development of communicative competence through the various modalities of speech, and its concept of learning is a social construct constrained by the conventions of schooling. A research agenda is proposed and a 22-item bibliography included. (MSE)

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WHAT IS FLL RESEARCH?

Claire J. Kramsch

This paper examines the relationship between three areas of research that bear on the teaching of foreign languages in educational settings--second language acquisition research (SLA), foreign language (FL) education, and foreign language learning (FLL) research--and attempts to define the latter. As an area of inquiry, the field of FLL is characterized by specific features of its setting, its object of research, its method of investigation, its concept of language and of language learning. A research agenda is suggested that takes into account both the psychological and the social dimensions of language learning in classrooms.

As foreign language teachers turn to applied linguistics to understand the way people learn foreign languages in instructional settings, they encounter two relevant research strands, second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language learning (FLL) research that have emerged in recent years. The question, "What is the relationship between SLA and FLL and what can each contribute to teaching foreign languages in classrooms?" is an important one. Yet, as linguists are busy discussing theoretical issues, language teachers have to help solve urgent matters of foreign language policy with or without the help of SLA or FLL research. For example, in Germany, a theoretically oriented SLA (Wode, 1985; Felix and Hahn, 1985) vies with an empirical FLL research (e.g. Koordinierungsgremium, 1983; Bausch and Königs, 1983, 1985; Bausch, 1986) for the favors of foreign language teachers and learners while 4 1/2 million foreigners need to be integrated linguistically and socially into German society and economy. In the U.S., the two strands of SLA, the universal-grammar oriented (e.g. Flynn, 1987) and the broader psycholinguistics strands (e.g. Seliger and Long, 1983; Gass and Madden, 1985) seem to have been short-circuited to a certain extent by a foreign language pedagogy that is responding to urgent national priorities under the pragmatic principle of "proficiency" (e.g. Higgs, 1984). Here, as in Germany, the lack of sufficient information on the complex factors involved in foreign language learning have left classroom teachers to their own devices. Turning to foreign language education, they take some ideas from first or second language acquisition research to the extent that they fit into their procedural agenda, and for the rest they follow general educational methods that work.

FLL VERSUS SLA AND FL EDUCATION

FLL in educational settings--and I will concentrate on educational settings rather than general instructional

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settings--is currently the immediate concern of neither SLA research nor FL education research. SLA research, within a theoretical linguistics framework, is concerned mostly with the biological and psychological processes of learners in and out of classrooms. It asks such questions as: How do learners acquire L2 structures irrespective of such external factors as setting, instruction, etc.? What are the universal sequences of acquisition impervious to manipulation because they are biologically founded? Psycholinguistic SLA asks in addition: How is language learning linked to motivation, cognitive development, and degree of socialization of the learners? In both cases, SLA research is centered on the learner as an independent biological and psychological entity. It uses mostly quantitative methods of investigation. Until recently, SLA classroom research has used mostly interactional analysis or analysis of the surface features of discourse. But for a few exceptions, it has not attempted to interpret the phenomena observed in the light of their social context. Classroom studies have been mostly of the "input-output variety," correlating, for example, certain learner characteristics or strategies with second language achievement. Furthermore, up to now, most classroom-oriented SLA research has been conducted in ESL classrooms, in which the teacher is a native speaker, not in FL classes, for example in U.S. secondary public schools.

The other branch of research, FL education, is mainly concerned with the procedural aspects of the transmission of knowledge, be it a foreign language or any other sort of knowledge. The questions it asks are more of the type: How can we better help learners become proficient in a foreign language? (e.g. Omaggio, 1986) It is centered on the teachers not on the learners, and on teachers' need to conduct foreign language lessons. Neither psycholinguistic SLA nor FL education research address the essential aspect of FLL, namely the socially and instructionally mediated acquisition of a foreign language in a classroom setting.

As an area of inquiry, the field of FLL is characterized by very specific features regarding its setting, its object of research, its method of investigation, its concept of language and of language learning.

Setting

In addition to the biological and psychological fcundations of SLA, FLL in classrooms is affected by a multiplicity of variables that affect the propensity of learners to acquire a foreign language and the rate of this acquisition. Language is "internalized" (Snow, 1987) on a grid of interpersonal transactions that are different from the social transactions in which L1 was acquired and in which foreign languages are acquired in natural settings. In a school setting, FLL is seriously affected by such factors as error correction, teaching methods, favored versus disfavored communication patterns between teacher and students and between students, turn-allocation across genders, statuses, roles, encouraged

versus discouraged kinds of voice, allowed versus disallowed types of creativity and originality (Are we encouraging true creativity or mere syntactic productivity?), previous FLL experience of learners (Are we dealing with L2 or L3 learners? with interactional patterns established by previous teachers?); it is also affected by the social background of learners and their degree of literacy and schooling.

Object of Research

The question posed by FLL is not as in FL education, "How can we better help learners learn?" but "How can we better understand the conditions of FL learning and teaching in classrooms so that we can change and improve these conditions?" Thus FLL is oriented toward the learner, but the whole learner, in his or her biological, neurological, psychological, social, affective and personal make-up. FLL takes an integrative view of the learner, drawing on a variety of related fields: psycho- and sociolinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, information-processing theory, cultural anthropology and ethnography, literacy studies and the teaching of English as a first language, and even foreign language policy. Its goal is not to control or predict the acquisition of the forms of the language, but to shed light on those classroom conditions that might further or hinder the learners' appropriation of a foreign language.

Methods of Investigation

FLL cannot be content to describe the phenomena observed and submit them to quantitative analysis, as has been done in most current SLA. As Michael Long pointed out in 1980, SLA has to interpret the empirical data collected in the light of existing or emerging theories about human behavior, learning, and language learning, using also methods taken from the social sciences: interviews, questionnaires, introspective accounts, diaries, loud thinking protocols. It has to understand both the behavior of classroom learners and what informs that behavior. Descriptive anthropological studies, such as interactional analysis, can inform experimental work. Long notes, that "knowledge derived from [interactional analysis] would show not simply what the organization of interaction in a classroom is, but how it is achieved" (p. 32). The fact that, as with all ethnographic research, the method can create the phenomena it purports to discover, does not, in my view, speak against using such an approach, if it does not replace, but supplements more quantitative SLA methods of research that allow for greater generalization. FLL itself could profit from adopting an action-oriented approach, which searched for a convergence between researcher's and participant's perspectives, thus making the participants--the teachers and the learners--the very agents of the social change needed to effect language learning in classrooms.

Concept of Language

Unlike FL education that is anxious to divide language into a series of separate skills, FLL research must consider

language in its total expressive and communicative thrust and deal with the global exploration of the development of communicative competence through the various modalities of speech. It must view the categorization into separate skills as detracting from the global concern with communication, as if we were using blinkers instead of telescopes to understand the complex phenomena involved. In addition, FLL must consider language to be quintessentially indeterminate and culturally relative and thus view communication, especially communication between interlocutors of two different cultures, as the negotiation of meanings intended and interpreted within an interactional context. To quote Martin Buber: "Meaning is not in us and in things, but between us and things, it can happen" (cited in Cook, 1985:7).

Concept of Learning

Learning, for FLL, is not only a mental process as it is for SLA, it is a social construct constrained by the conventions of schooling. In classrooms, language learning is a socially mediated process that originates and is ultimately fulfilled, not in the learner's Language Acquisition Device (Chomsky, 1957: 30-37), but via the support system of the learning environment or Language Acquisition Support System (Bruner, 1985). "There is no way," says Bruner, "in which a human being could possibly master another world without the aid of others, for, in fact, that world is others" (1985:32). If learning another language is mediated by the social environment of the classroom and if in addition this social environment is supposed to lead to a reorganization of sociocultural consciousness through the acquisition of foreign cultural meanings (Vygotsky, 1962; Frawley and Lantolf, 1985; Wertsch, 1985), then we need much more research into the social context of classroom FLL. Furthermore, classroom learning is, as we know, constrained by institutional parameters: It is related to the ability of learners to display items of academically defined, and thus socially acceptable, knowledge, to match this knowledge with pre-established norms, to equate it with numbers of chapters in a textbook or items on a syllabus. In the classroom, difficulties in language acquisition are not due to linguistic complexity alone, but to a host of external factors such as lack of experiential background, lapses in memory, high affective defenses, and procedural deficits, i.e., the inability to navigate around the established norms of classroom discourse (Allwright, 1980). "The competence that is sufficient to produce sentences likely to be understood may be totally insufficient to produce sentences likely to be listened to...Social acceptability cannot be reduced to grammaticality alone" (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 42).

Some ten years ago Tarone, Swain and Fathman (1976) listed seven limitations to the classroom applications of SLA research. Among them were: lack of data on cognitive processes and learning strategies, limited information about the role of social and environmental variables, undeveloped methodology for data collection. Today, I feel, with Lightbown (1985), that FLL has a specific classroom agenda that is not attended to by

current SLA. Lightbown remarked that SLA in its current state can contribute immensely to teacher education, but not to teacher training. I would like to suggest that we would need less teacher training if we had a more interdisciplinary, comprehensive teacher education. Our capacity for teaching teachers how to teach is and will remain as limited as our ability to teach learners how to learn. What we can do, however, is make them understand why they do what they do and the consequences of what they do. For that, FLL research still needs to continue exploring such questions as:

* How do learners acquire lexical meanings, develop concepts from the foreign lexical and grammatical structures they learn, pass from one-to-one equivalence to multifunctionality within the L2 system of semantic relations?
* What is the relationship between literacy skills, especially decontextualization skills, and the ability to manipulate symbols in a variety of cultural and social contexts?
* What is the impact of classroom discourse (teacher/students, students/students interaction) on the acquisition of L2 discourse patterns and on the setting of different sociolinguistic parameters of language in use? Might the meaning of language learning in classrooms reside in the institutional ritual itself (Bourdieu, 1982)?
* What is the impact of the acquisition of other modalities, such as writing and reading, on the acquisition of oral communicative competence? In particular, what impact does the literate environment of the classroom have on the acquisition of oral speech forms?
* What are the differences in learning strategies at different levels of proficiency?
* What is the impact of culturally determined learning styles on the acquisition of foreign cultural forms of discourse? In particular, what is the nature of textbook-mediated language acquisition? For example, how do textbooks help students make links between different aspects of knowledge, pass from one cultural framework to another, construct meanings, etc.?
* Language teachers need to know what the difference is between teaching/learning a language and teacher/learning any other subject in school--from math to driver's education.
* Finally, what are the political, economic, ideological, societal forces that compel teachers to teach the way they do IRRESPECTIVE of insights gained through SLA-FLL research?

Such a research agenda is hardly touched upon by current research in SLA and has been neglected by FL education. This in part explains why FL teachers feel disenfranchised by current language learning research. I would like to advocate broadening the agenda of SLA to include more systematically the social and societal dimensions of language learning in classrooms. We do not need yet another discipline which teachers would look up to for definitive answers; what we do need is the participation of teachers, learners, and researchers in the joint attempt to formulate the questions that are critical to FLL in classrooms.

These questions should be conceptualized at the necessary level of abstraction, so that rather than promoting piecemeal methods that work we can start searching for answers in an integrated manner. For example, the questions should not be: "How should I teach dialogues?" but rather: "What do I want my students to know, how will I know that they know it, and what conditions can I help create in the classroom that will facilitate both the acquisition and the display of that knowledge? And, if the educational setting does not allow me to create those conditions, how can I change the educational setting?"

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